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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the possibility of establishing a threshold level for the projected European units/credits system for modern languages in adult education. By threshold level is understood "a basic level of foreign language proficiency the level below which no further levels could be usefully distinguished." It is concluded that the height of the threshold level cannot be determined on the basis of minimum language needs, because there is no such thing as a more or less definable minimum. The criterion ultimately chosen was that of estimated average study time. The threshold level defined is, in fact, the general proficiency level which the average European adult learner is expected to be able to reach in a year's time, given the availability of adequate language learning facilities. The criterion for the content of this level was based on the estimated usefulness for the majority of adult language learners in the majority of everyday situations. A more appropriate name for the level thus described (rather than threshold level) might be "first general proficiency level." (Author)

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(St. Wolfgang (Austria), 17 - 28 June 1973)

"THE THRESHOLD-LEVEL IN A UNIT/CREDIT SYSTEM"

by

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The threshold-level in a unit/credit system

Our work on the unit/credit system has been marked from the outset by a certain dualism. The main effort has been directed towards defining the principles on which such a system should be constructed. This has resulted in a set of proposals which, in our view, would enable this system to be gradually set up, the outlines to be gradually filled in. This system would be highly innovative and flexible, solving the apparent paradox of optimal individualisation combined with the fullest possible utilisation of mass-media. If the outlines appear still to be somewhat vague, this is due to the nature of such a system which should have the capacity of absorbing heterogeneous approaches appropriate to highly diversified language-learning conditions, and which must be a safeguard against rigidity. Few prospects could be more deterring than that of a European language authority imposing a rigid syllabus defined for once and for all and thus impeding further progress in a field which is still in the early stages of development.

In spite of these principles, to which I fully subscribe, I am myself responsible for a proposal which seems to be diametrically opposed to our plea for flexibility and individualisation. I have even gone to the length of proposing a centrally controlled examination conducted along the same, precisely defined lines all over Europe, and based on a command of prescribed structure and vocabulary lists. My proposal even implies the harnessing of all European languages into a single conceptual framework.

In the first sentence of my introduction I spoke of a certain dualism in our work. I assume I have made it clear to you just what I meant by this. I shall now proceed to an account of why we felt this dualism was admissible and even necessary and to an attempt to demonstrate that the two directions of our work are, after all, not in conflict with each other, that, on the contrary, they are fully compatible. I hope I shall be able to convince you of this, because on this basis your discussions during this Symposium may bring us much nearer to the realisation of the scheme.

Very soon after the Rüschlikon Symposium we decided on the dual approach I have described because we felt that our wish to develop a unit/credit system as an overall framework, which would clearly be a long-term project, should not preclude simultaneously making a much more concrete attempt to satisfy a need which was only too apparent, and that in such a way that the result of what was to be a short-term project, would fit into the overall framework which would gradually take shape over a much longer period. Such a first, concrete step would, we hope, lead to experimentation on a European scale, it would enable us to gain experience with both possibilities and problems of international schemes in adult education before we would have definitely committed ourselves to more far-reaching proposals for the unit/credit system as a whole, and it would serve to indicate that the ultimate aim of our work was, after all, an eminently practical one.

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In selecting a subject for this sub-project we took into consideration that whatever language needs might be brought to light in further investigations and whatever sub-divisions might consequently be developed in the unit/credit system, this system would at any rate have to cater for the large proportion of learners who aim at general language proficiency at various levels. This meant that whatever form the ultimate system might take it would have to incorporate in one way or another a number of general proficiency levels. It was recognised that the lowest of these levels would be of particular importance. It might, in a way, be considered the basis of the whole system. In the first place, a very large number, probably the majority, of those desiring to learn a foreign language wish to acquire a general, non-specialised, command of the language. These learners would naturally pass into the unit/credit system via the lowest general proficiency level. In the second place, even among those who wish to satisfy more specialised language needs there will be many, if not a majority, who will seek to satisfy their needs by first gaining some sort of general proficiency, if only at a low level, and then branching off into more specialised directions. In the third place, a large proportion of those potentially interested in a foreign language will wish to know just enough of the language to "get by" in more superficial contacts with foreign language speakers. In other words, the provision of a basic level of general proficiency might completely satisfy the language needs of many potential foreign language learners. Finally, the generally recognised first levels of general language proficiency are, on the whole, considerably higher than what might be considered survival level. They usually require at least a few years of study, which is more than many would-be learners are prepared, or able, to undertake and thus deter rather than attract especially the less strongly motivated and also, perhaps more important, those with little confidence in their own learning potential. Since one of the principal aims of the unit/credit scheme is to increase motivation for foreign language learning the provision of a low level of general proficiency, requiring a relatively small amount of study time would be an important step towards reaching this aim. Moreover, many members of large organisations for adult education have already expressed a wish that a lower proficiency level should be set up than the ones currently recognised. An initiative by the Council of Europe would therefore stand a fair chance of being favourably received. This might, we hoped, lead to the introduction on a large scale of at least one part of the unit/credit system.

We therefore decided to give some priority to the definition of what came to be called the threshold-level. This was to be a basic level of foreign language proficiency, the level "below which no further levels could be usefully distinguished".

This sub-project was assigned to me, while at the same time Professor Wilkins undertook to investigate what was called the common grammatical core of the unit/credit system, paying special attention to the threshold-level.

In carrying out my task I was led by what I felt to be the basic function of the unit/credit system: the promotion of adult language learning through the establishment, on a European scale, of a system designed to ensure for each individual learner an optimal return for his investment of learning efforts. In essence, such a system would be a system of well-defined learning objectives derived from an analysis of foreign language needs. Also, it would have to ensure recognition of individual learning achievements on an international scale, and it would have to be capable of establishing comparability of such achievements not with regard to a single language but between all European languages. By thus giving meaningful direction to learners' efforts the system would serve its main purpose: to increase motivation for adult foreign language learning. It would do so effectively by replacing, or, alternatively, by restoring order into the present chaotic situation where there are hundreds of different certificates, granted on the basis of hundreds of different examinations. The validity of these examinations is, in most cases, highly doubtful, and comparability of the diplomas is, on the whole, illusionary. This is, indeed, hardly surprising because the learning objectives operationalised in the examinations are usually described with such lack of precision that numerous different interpretations are possible.

My reference to examinations should not be misinterpreted. The unit/credit system is not to be a system of examinations but a system of learning objectives. It is my own view that the unit/credit system will be all the more effective if it includes the possibility of taking examinations and acquiring internationally recognised credits. In our present state of society this facility may even be a prerequisite to its acceptance. Basically, however, the provision of examinations is irrelevant to the system as such. On the other hand it should be recognised that learning objectives and examinations have so much in common that in certain contexts the two terms may be interchangeable. A learning objective specifies what a learner should be able to do if he has successfully completed a learning task, and an examination is a procedure which enables him to give evidence of this ability before one or more judges.

Both learning objectives and examinations may therefore be described in terms of the same operations, though this is not necessarily the case.

On the basis of these and similar considerations I interpreted my task as giving an operational specification of the threshold-level as a learning objective and that in a non-language-specific way, i.e. in such a way that the specification would be applicable to all European languages. If this proved to be possible a basis would be provided for the comparability that I spoke of before.

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Of course, it was obvious right from the start that I would run into a great many difficulties, both of a practical and of a theoretical nature. Moreover, if it appeared that fundamental research would be needed for the fulfilment of my task I would have to find an alternative because there would be neither enough time nor sufficient funds available for this.

If this sounds like a very unsatisfactory starting-point, I would remind you that it is normal for educational innovation projects to be carried out on a ridiculously tight budget by people who cannot really spare the time. It is also normal, if practical results are the aim, to set aside most of one's theoretical scruples and academic reservations. Unless one is willing to do this one can never hope to produce concrete proposals at the rate at which our rapidly changing society requires them. Society just cannot afford to wait for the experts to solve their problems to their own satisfaction before it introduces innovations into its structure. For the experts this entails the obligation to recommend courses of action even without having solved most of their problems, in other words to stick their necks out even if they would much prefer not to do so.

If I have rather emphasised this point, it is because I want to be absolutely clear about it that the socially committed researcher is in a very different position from the purely academic scientist and that this may considerably affect his method of research.

In the case of my own two papers this means that what value they may have lies in their capacity to serve as a basis for serious discussion by a group of practitioners, experts and policy-makers such as yours. I would request you to approach them in the same spirit, that is with a determination to establish something tangible and concrete which may serve a useful purpose in the immediate future. We shall not be unduly alarmed if you reject my proposals partly or even totally, but it would be a very serious matter indeed if in that case you did not replace them by something capable of equally concrete and practical exemplification.

Very soon after the start of my work I realised that what I had been asked to do was impossible. The threshold-level, as a level guaranteeing a successful learner that he would survive, linguistically speaking, in a foreign language community, as a level below which no further levels could be usefully distinguished, just did not exist. We all know that some people have an amazing capacity for communication with foreign language speakers even if their command of the language concerned is practically non-existent. We also know

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that others fail to establish any communication worth speaking of even on the basis of a few years of foreign language study. We also know that minimum language needs may differ so widely that one man's survival level might be another's frustration level. A tourist who finds himself in a foreign country may perhaps get along quite happily on a vocabulary of barely more than a hundred words, mostly concrete nouns and a few action verbs, state-adjectives and modal adverbials, whereas a migrant labourer may need a much larger vocabulary and a greater command of grammatical structure if he is to survive - linguistically speaking - in his occupational environment. Again, a grandfather who wishes to be able to read the letters sent to him by his fond relatives, second generation emigrants to a foreign language community, will find that his minimum level will have to be a fairly high one. It will be even higher for those whose minimum requirement is the ability to make some sense of articles in popular newspapers and the more general type of radio programmes.

The conclusion from all this is not that there is no need for a well-defined threshold-level. It can only be that the height of the threshold-level cannot be determined on the basis of minimum language needs because there is no such thing as a more or less definable minimum. In addition, the acquisition of foreign language proficiency is not a process with natural articulation points but a continuum. It follows from this that the height of the threshold-level cannot be determined either on the basis of an infra-linguistic criterion. The criterion I ultimately chose was estimated average study time. The threshold-level which I tried to define is, in fact, the general proficiency level which I expected the average European adult learner to be able to reach in a year's time, given the availability of adequate language learning facilities. My assessment of the average adult's foreign language acquisition capacity was based on data available from various sources, especially those provided by the German Volkshochschulverband. In this organisation the average study time for a proficiency level two to three times as high in terms of lexical and grammatical content is two or three years. This, then, has been the main criterion for determining the height of the threshold-level: the level which can presumably be reached after an average study time of one year. The content of the level has, of course, been determined on other grounds. The main criterion for this has been the estimated usefulness for the majority of adult language learners in the majority of everyday situations. The procedure used for determining this content is described in the two papers I have produced for the Council of Europe and which have now been submitted to you for group discussions. The concrete results of this procedure are also presented in full, especially in my second paper. Other proposals have been made by Professor Wilkins, with exemplification for the threshold-level. I think you will find, when you compare the actual results of our two approaches in terms of proposed threshold-level content, that the two are supplementary to each other rather than incompatible.

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It should be clear from what I have said so far that, in my view, the term threshold-level, like the terms survival level, basic competence level, minimum level, etc., is somewhat misleading. In fact, a much more appropriate name for the level I have tried to define would be "first general proficiency level".

I shall not go into any further detail with regard to the actual definition of this level as proposed in my second paper, because it is all in the paper and I would merely be repeating what you have all been able to read (I hope) before coming to St. Wolfgang.

At the beginning of this introduction I mentioned the dualism of our approach towards the development of a unit/credit system. I would like to end by arguing that there is no internal conflict in this dualism, that, in fact, the concept of a threshold-level and the proposed definition of this level, are fully compatible with the philosophy behind the unit/credit system and with the specification of the outlines of the system as provided by other members of our group.

The unit/credit system will consist of modules grouped into units for which credits may be granted. The modules are separate learning tasks specified in terms of language activities with respect to certain language materials appropriate to certain roles in certain situations. The system is learner centred not only in the determination of the content of the modules on the basis of learners' needs but also in the freedom it offers to individual learners to select those modules which will best serve their purposes. Each learner will therefore be free to select his own group of modules on the basis of his own needs or wishes. The threshold-level is one such group of modules. It is that group of modules which is supposed to be the most useful combination to the majority of adult beginners and therefore the combination most likely to be chosen by them.

So far no separate modules have been defined within the threshold-level. This is because the development of the principles of the unit/credit system was undertaken simultaneously with and, for practical reasons, separately from that of the threshold-level.

However, this should not detract from the usefulness of the threshold-level as long as the two developments can be integrated. That such an integration is feasible I have tried to demonstrate.

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If no modules can be distinguished yet, there are other sub-divisions within the threshold-level which constitute more of less natural units. I am referring to the four skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing. The threshold-level as a whole constitutes a general competence level covering each of the four skills. It would be erroneous, however, to assume that all learners would need - or wish - to master each skill. Therefore, it must be made possible for each learner to choose that skill or that combination of skills which suits his needs or his inclination. This means that if any sort of official recognition is to be given to a successful learner, this should not be limited only to those who have reached the threshold-level in each skill. The principle of individualisation of the learning process conflicts with a rigid system of certificates granted only for an overall command of a foreign language. This principle rather demands the issue of learner's profiles which certify their achievements in separate skills and in separate areas of language use. A by no means negligible effect of this procedure will be an enormous reduction of failure rates. A system which aims at fostering motivation should attempt to eliminate the chances of failure as much as possible, especially in adult education. A great many of our prospective learners will have no previous record of educational achievement. A system which would encourage these people to undertake fresh learning efforts should try to recognise any kind of achievement, however limited this may be.

This, then, would be one way to prevent the rigidity which I mentioned in the early part of this introduction. Now what about the rigidity imposed by a minutely defined learning objective? We are all of us aware of the clogging effect of many examinations and tests on educational progress. Once an objective has been defined and corresponding examinations and tests have been developed it tends to determine the course of education for a much longer time than it was originally intended to. This is not only due to natural inertia but also to lack of facilities - people and money - for frequent revision. This need not be - and must not be - the case with the threshold-level. If the unit/credit system, and within it the threshold-level, is to function adequately at all provisions should be made to make permanent revision and adaptation possible. This means that a permanent European board should be created whose task it will be not only to stimulate and co-ordinate the further development of the system but also to ensure that it is constantly adapted to changing learners' needs. Such a board would cost money, more money, in fact, than has been available so far for this project. However, I refuse to believe that such funds could not be obtained for an undertaking of the scope and importance of a European unit/credit system in adult foreign language learning. It might be one of the results of this Symposium that in future it will be possible to obtain funds more easily.

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Whether this will be the case will to a large extent depend on how practical, feasible and concrete our final recommendations are going to be. This I would recommend as the guiding principle of all your Committee discussions: aim at practical, feasible and concrete recommendations. If we are not successful in this we can hardly expect the real and very concrete world of language teaching confronted with the eminently practical needs of its learners to take much notice of our proposals.

Your discussions of the threshold-level in particular can be directed at this aim. In my second paper you find very concrete proposals not only for the definition of this level but also for its implementation. I would suggest that the emphasis of the group discussions dealing with this subject during the first part of this Symposium should be on the nature and the definition of the threshold-level and that the specialists' group in the latter half of the Symposium should concentrate on implementation problems. I would like to make it very clear to you that my proposals at this stage are no more than draft proposals. They have hardly been discussed beyond the small group of the Steering Committee and your reactions will be essential to give them a more definitive status. Some questions we would particularly like to have your views on are the following:

1. Do you feel there is a need for a threshold-level as a first general competence level or would you wish to give it a different function within the unit/credit system, if so what function?

2. Should the threshold-level be the same for all learners and for all European languages, as it is proposed in my papers, or should the contents be more variable in accordance with regional, social and individual circumstances?

3. Should a threshold-level be defined as narrowly as it is proposed in my papers, i.e. especially in terms of linguistic content and operations, or should different defining criteria be employed, if so what criteria?

4. If my own proposals, together with those made by Professor Wilkins, can serve as a working basis for the development of the threshold-level, what changes - general or detailed - would you wish to be made in them? If you prefer to reject the proposals totally, what would you propose instead? Please be as concrete as possible.

For the discussions of the Threshold-level Committee in the second part of the week I would recommend especially the following topics:

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1. Should a permanent central agency be established?

If this question is answered in the affirmative:

2. In what organisational framework should it be set up?

3. What should be the duties of this agency?

4. What should be its powers?

5. What should be its relations with educational organisations, producers, publishers, etc.?

6. How should it be composed?

7. How much time will its members be expected to have available for it?

8. Should a permanent bureau be at its disposal?

9. Should it have research facilities, if so what facilities will be needed?

If the first question is answered negatively:

2. How is the further development of the threshold-level to be ensured?

3. How is the threshold-level to be introduced into adult education?

4. How is periodical revision and adaptation of the threshold-level specifications to be ensured?

5. How much further should the Steering Committee continue its work on the threshold-level?

These questions, I assume, will keep you quite busy during your group discussions. The effort you will make to answer them will not be wasted. It will materially affect the future course of European adult language learning. By doing so it will also affect the growth of European understanding and unity.